

Justice comes after ethics and before utopia, writes the cultural sociologist Pascal Gielen. According to his theory, the moral evaluation of facts, situations, and circumstances underlies not only any subsequent decision, but ultimately also the mission of envisioning and shaping the future, a mission that artists, writers, and philosophers have always embraced with great zeal.

Andrej Dúbravský's most recent works grow out of analyses and assessments of contemporary developments and characters. The artist's paintings articulate his reflections in empathetic yet unsparing studies of the environment and its devastation, of man and nature. Born in Nové Zámky in 1987, Dúbravský lives in the countryside, some sixty miles outside the Slovakian capital. Talking to him over FaceTime, you hear birds chirping in the background, and clucking chickens strut through the frame. Dúbravský's off-canvas activities are so closely intertwined with his work that it is hard to tell whether growing plants and raising animals on his land are merely recreational pursuits or maybe part and parcel of his creative practice. They certainly make the artist alert to changes in the environment that urbanites are much slower to pick up on. For example, he will notice when certain butterflies no longer flit about in his garden, where he also paints, ousted by an invasion of previously unseen caterpillars native to more southerly regions.

Caterpillars, captured in large-than-life portraits, are a recurrent motif in Dúbravský's work. Unnatural washed-out colors and razor-sharp hairs lend the larvae a repugnant air of toxicity; they are luminous, throbbing and beaming like radioactive material or influenza virus seen through a microscope. In some instances, however, Dúbravský has given them faces, crediting them with a will of their own and showing them as vulnerable creatures.

The same gesture of profound empathy and environmental consciousness is even more salient in the artist's studies of fruit: apples, pears, and berries hang on trees and shrubs, helplessly caught, some smiling, others with faces contorted by pain. When Dúbravský watches how his neighbors treat their fruit trees, he—to put it with an unabashedly romanticizing turn of phrase—feels with the fruits: the pears being sprayed suffer, the apples being spared grin.

Dúbravský has an astute eye for the world around him, and not just his garden and the hamlet of eight hundred souls where he lives. The factories and fuming smokestacks that roll past on his regular train trips to Bratislava likewise make their mark on the raw canvases that are the artist's preferred support medium. Dúbravský renders them in a spare visual idiom, as geometric volumes shrouded in billowing smoke that makes the industrial complexes seem menacing and inscrutable. The fumes they emit are the most blatant form of environmental pollution, the most shameless climate sin, driving the migration of caterpillars from warmer climates to Dúbravský's garden and, what is worse, pushing the world and the political structures that lend it order to the brink of collapse. The moral line of demarcation is clear: anthropogenic and irreversible damage to ecosystems and the climate on the one side, a nature and biological diversity worthy of protection on the other. Highlighting the contrast

between them, Dúbravský believes, is the first step toward a future in which no line will need to be drawn between human action and the state of nature.

The depictions of industrial structures in particular suggest a novel degree of abstraction in the artist's oeuvre. He feels that this aesthetic—which he describes, in an apt formula that bespeaks his self-confidence, as “Paul Klee with Helen Frankenthaler layered on top”—affords him greater creative liberty. Dúbravský's reference to these lodestars illustrates his extensive familiarity with the history of painting.

His broad art-historical repertoire is reflected by his most recent works, which explore contemporary versions of classical subjects such as the landscape or the nude—quite seriously and diligently in some instances, with aloof irony in others. This tendency is especially evident in the pictures that show male figures populating sceneries composed out of nature and industry. The muted colors seem almost conservative until the beholder notes the contemporary and post-traditional context in which the paintings are set: for several years now, the figure of the gay farmer has been an object of keen interest and ethnographic scrutiny in Andrej Dúbravský's oeuvre. He met several such men at markets in Slovakia, fascinating characters who awakened a sense of kinship in him. The scenes shatter the chauvinistic and heteronormative cliché image of the farmer while enacting the close relationship with nature that also defines the artist's own everyday life. Almost lyrical anecdotes from a peaceful everyday life—in these pictures, the artist deliberately eschewed any explicit depiction of male genitalia—are shadowed by the threat of its demise looming in the backgrounds: in the form, again, of smokestacks, whose phallic proportions now come to the fore, proxies for the ever-accelerating eddy of unbridled homo consumerism, of cheap and inane cruises, constant and emotionless (and, in many instances, paid) sex, and discount-store fashions. Seen from the artist's countryside perch, where everything is reduced to its essential features, such consumption is readily recognizable as yet another manifestation of the ignorance of nature. On Instagram, where Dúbravský is very active, he captioned one work—a boy pensively gazing out a window at a factory building—with the words “watching an apocalypse from the window ...”

It is against this apocalypse that the artist takes a stand with his vision of a peaceful, holistically aware, and queer agriculture. This is a life that is attuned to nature not so much because understanding it is a prerequisite of relentless production but rather out of a deeply felt affinity. Woven out of observations from day-to-day life and its ordinary realities, it is a vision that, in Pascal Gielen's words, is already more utopia than justice. Dúbravský translates his bafflement and indignation over climate change and the prevailing blindness to ecological concerns into productive and free-ranging associations. Activists (as well as activist art) primarily seek justice, but Dúbravský aims to give shape to a state of affairs that will never come to pass, not even approximately, and yet is, for him, the only escape from an irremediably depressing present. Sarcasm and cynicism are not an option: the menaces of

insect die-offs and ever-mounting fine particulate air pollution are constant presences in Dúbravský's life.

It is worth noting that his paintings do not try to teach us a lesson or enjoin us to abstain from consumption and pleasure. On the contrary, Dúbravský encourages us to embrace our freedom, to be naked in the great outdoors, to pick fruit from the trees and eat it on the spot, to plant flowers and keep chickens. His work champions greater climate sensitivity through maximum liberty—an ethical hedonism that will perhaps forever remain utopian.